

Narrative by Catherine Fitzpatrick

Dear Dr. Peggy Bulger,

I am writing to express concern about the loss of the 911 “memorial wall” in front of Bellevue Hospital around E. 27 and E. 28th Streets and First Avenue in Manhattan. It appears no one took measures to save it, and it is really a loss because it was an extraordinary chronicle of the victims of 911 and the response of their fellow New Yorkers and dealing with the attack on America.

I happen to live near this area at Waterside Plaza and would often pass it on my way to work after dropping my kids off at school. As you know, all relatives of those killed in the World Trade Center attack came by the thousands in the first hours and days after the disaster into this midtown neighborhood. Because these hospitals have easy access to two FDR exits and are next to the city morgue, they served as a kind of disaster staging ground. Temporary tents were up and streets blocked off all around this area, and a temporary Quonset hut has also now been set up where the remains of victims are held in refrigerated trucks, hopefully to be identified eventually.

People lined up for blocks and blocks outside the hospitals along First Avenue — Bellevue, NYU, Veterans, etc. I recall seeing them stretching from Bellevue to the Rusk Rehabilitation Center, i.e. about 6-7 blocks on Sept. 11 and 12 and following. All along First Avenue, on every wall, phone booth, bus shelter, storefront, etc. these people post 8 1/2 x 11 or larger “missing persons” posters, made at Kinkos and other Xerox shops which donate services for free. Indeed, some Xerox shops like Mailboxes, Etc. and Kinkos and so on posted notices that they would help families of the victims with free xeroxing — and the posters appeared within hours of the planes hitting.

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The way in which all these relatives and our community dealt with this terrible phenomena of people being incinerated and lost forever within an hour was to call them “missing persons”. At root people knew they weren't really “missing” but dead, but they held out the hope that perhaps, a loved one just had a brick on their head and maybe had amnesia, and maybe they would be in an ER somewhere or wandering around and unable to give their names. If possible would be put up, maybe someone would spot them and reunited them with their families...

Thousands of people stood in line and filled out these largely unnecessary “missing person reports” some 7 and 9 pages in length supplied by the NYPD, Salvation Army, etc. I suppose it was a kind of grief therapy. They supplied toothbrushes and hairbrushes with DNA to see if parts could be matched in identifying bodies. I wonder at which point the expense and futility of doing that will begin to be publicly discussed. But on September 11 and following, people stood filling out these forms and then plastered every wall with these “missing” posters. It was clear within a few days that people just weren't being rescued, that injured weren't being brought, and that “missing” was not really the word to apply to these people. And yet, because they were indeed missing from everyone's lives, the posters stayed up, and even new ones were added. It was like the time little Etan Patz, the boy kidnapped down in Soho years ago, went missing one fall evening, and his poster was plastered throughout the city in a matter of days and hours. Only multiply this by about 3000...

No, they weren't really missing. And yet we did cling to this term because there were so few bodies or even parts of bodies being found. People kept those posters up. No one dared to touch them. To do so would be sacrilegious. They lasted and continued to last all along First and Second Avenue and also over at Lexington and E. 29th St. at the Armory, which was a kind of staging ground for help to all the families. The Armory was the site of numerous posters, candles, prayers, etc. and a giant long poster that said “Hope” and “Esperanza” in English and Spanish which are the two main languages of New York City.

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But then authorities took all this down from the Armory within 30 days, or “Month's Mind” as it would be called in the Catholic Church. The entire Family Assistance Center was moved from the Armory on 29th St. “out of sight, out of mind” over to the 94th Pier over off 12th Avenue, where you can still see the posters on the walls there.

Meanwhile, the hospitals dealt with the missing posters phenomena in different ways, according to my observations. Cabrini, a Catholic hospital on E. 19th between First and Second Avenues, which itself had lost at least ER physicians to the tragedy and had treated patients from the disasters, decided to take all the missing posters, and just keep the victims' names — they cut out the words “missing” and then just took people's pictures, names, etc. from the posters and took away the stuff like “Cantor Fitzgerald, 104th Floor” and they put this collage in a large glass case up on the wall, with a table nearby with a book of memories and candles and so on.

Cosmos Diner on Second Avenue and 23rd St. took the posters of the lost policemen and police cadets from the Police Academy plastered on their window and rearranged them into a little memorial board with a Police Department poster commemorating the fallen and some newspaper clippings which are still hanging. This is the diner where the Police Academy and 13th Precinct officers hang out.

Veterans' Hospital on First Avenue was the first to simply tear the posters down without comment, and sweep up the candles. I managed to save a few of these posters, a poem someone wrote with a flag drawn on it, etc. The shrine was blocking the wheelchair access ramp, and the memories were probably hard to bear for veterans who themselves were war-wounded in many cases and probably had seen worst scenes. So it had to go.

Then going up First Avenue, you saw that people left the posters on the telephone poles and bus shelters alone, but time took its toll, and after a few rains and windy days, you would see only tatters. I saved just a few of those. I couldn't bring myself to tear any of

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them down out right. I waited until it looked as if the wind would blow them away anyway, as I was walking to work, and then took a few, including a man from my church.

Then there was Bellevue Hospital, always a busy hospital even when there isn't a national disaster. And I would say the Bellevue Memorial was the best of all of them in terms of tolerance of people's grief, letting them put the posters up, letting them keep it up, letting them put little candles and whatnot, even little stuffed animals. Some employees even covered over the walls of posters with plastic sheeting to guard the posters from the rain. It just so happened that there is construction of a new DNA lab going up right next to Bellevue. And that created a long construction-type wall which you normally find in New York City plastered with Broadway show ads and such. So this construction wall running along First Avenue and through the entrance to Bellevue was kept going as a 911 memorial wall for I would estimate at least 60 days. I would say that other than walls springing up around Ground Zero, where in fact there have been less place to put up posters, the Bellevue wall was the most "complete" missing posters wall in the city I have seen.

But then sadly, it was all taken down. And we all felt devastated. It was it we were losing all our fellow New Yorkers again. We had gotten to know them and their stories, looking at their faces as we walked to work, and reading about them in those daily New York Times memorials of the victims. Some of them were people we knew, e.g. our church has lost several firemen and policemen, being Irish and Catholic, that was a community that tended to go into law enforcement and was overrepresented perhaps in the disaster.

What happened at Bellevue is that this DNA lab — controversial and the subject of some politicians' ranting and efforts to stop it for reasons I didn't really follow — had to have its ribbon-cutting ceremony in November around Thanksgiving, and a big, shiny new billboard about how it would look when it was done had to be put up. And the pictures of the dead folks just didn't look so good next to that, and I guess they had to come down. I don't know

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if anyone tried to save them. It looks like they didn't — the tape and edges of some of the posters still can be seen.

I wish they could have left up that wall. Even 90 days. Or better, even just a year. Or taken slices of it and put it away somewhere and then used it as a memorial at Ground Zero or somewhere.

If someday they build a memorial, I hope it will have some elements in its design that reflect those posters, billowing in the wind, tattered and covered with that strange gray silt that covered everything in New York City in the days after 911, which we touched and smoothed out countless times on the wall to try to see the faces of our fellow New Yorkers who were obliterated in a matter of hours.

I took some amateur snapshots of these walls, but they aren't the kind of quality even to put on the Internet. I'm not a professional, and I don't have any of the equipment or capacity to try to preserve something like this. I do flag it for your attention so that perhaps someone out there in your networks will have saved some of it.

Regards,

Catherine A. Fitzpatrick